

## Background Briefing:

### Recent Naval Exercises in the South China Sea

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The South China Sea has re-emerged as a regional hot spot as a result of increasingly assertive behaviour by China directed against the Philippines and Vietnam. This year China has been particularly aggressive in an attempt to enforce jurisdiction over waters in the South China Sea where its claims overlap with the Exclusive Economic Zones of these littoral states.



Since February, the Philippines has officially logged nine incidents in which Chinese vessels intruded into its waters. Three incidents are of particular significance. On February 25, three Filipino fishing craft near Jackson Atoll were ordered to leave the area by a Chinese Jianghu-V Class missile frigate. At least

three rounds were fired in the direction of the fishing boats to hasten their departure. On March 2, two Chinese civilian patrol boats accosted the MV *Veritas Voyager* near Reed Bank and ordered it to cease its oil exploration operations. One Chinese patrol boat maneuvered in such a manner that the MV *Veritas Voyager* concluded it was under threat of being rammed.

In May, Chinese ships were observed unloading construction materials, markers and plastic buoys on uninhabited rocks within the Philippines's Kalayaan Island Group. Chinese actions can be construed as a violation of the 2002 ASEAN-China Declaration on Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea that prohibits occupation of uninhabited rocks. The Philippine Navy and Coast Guard subsequently removed these materials from Amy Douglas Bank, Reed Bank and Boxall Reef.

In Vietnam's case there have been at least three incidents where Chinese ships have interfered with the commercial operations of oil exploration vessels within Vietnam's Exclusive Economic Zone. The most serious incident, which occurred on May 26, involved cutting the cable towed by the seismic vessel *Binh Minh 2*. Vietnam reported a second incident on June 9. It is unclear whether the cable was cut but the vessel involved, *Viking II*, had been subject to repeated harassment by Chinese boats in the week preceding the incident. The third incident reportedly occurred on June 30 and has been kept under wraps by Vietnamese

authorities. In this incident, Vietnamese escort vessels were able to chase off the Chinese boats.

China has responded to protests by the Philippines and Vietnam with a mix of condescension and belligerency. China either denies the incidents occurred or claims that its ships were the victims.



Chinese actions have led the Philippines to seek reassurance from the United States that its obligations under the 1951 Mutual Security Treaty still stand. The Philippines will take delivery of a U.S. Coast Guard Cutter shortly. The Philippines also is seeking to acquire and/or lease modern defence equipment from the United States to beef up its under-equipped armed forces and



to acquire six multi-role fighters (either Korea's TA-50 Golden Eagle or Italy's M-346). The U.S. is assisting with the provision of coastal radar and the Director of U.S. Intelligence has promised to enhance the Philippines' capacity for maritime domain awareness.

Vietnam has responded to Chinese assertiveness with a mix of self-help measures and by stepping up defence cooperation with the United States. In terms of self-help, Vietnam has been gradually modernizing its naval and air forces. In 2006, Vietnam placed an order with Russia for two modern Gepard-class frigates equipped with the Uran-E anti-ship missile; both frigates are expected to be delivered later this year. In December 2009, Vietnam placed an order with Russia for six Kilo-class submarines, twenty Sukhoi Su-30MK2 fighters and additional Svetlyak-class fast attack craft. Vietnam also has quietly added the land-based Bastion anti-ship cruise missile to its inventory.

This year Vietnam took the unprecedented step of announcing in advance live-firing exercises. On June 9, the Vietnam navy conducted two live firing exercises on June 13 in the waters near Hon Ong, an Island located approximately forty kilometres off Quang Nam province in central Vietnam.



Vietnam's Foreign Ministry characterized the live-firing exercises as "a routine annual training activity of the Vietnam navy in the area where the Vietnam navy regularly conducts training [activities] that are programmed and planned annually for units of the Vietnam People's Navy." Vietnam did not specify how many ships would be

involved but made clear no missiles would be fired. The first phase of the exercise involved coastal artillery while the second part of the exercise involved missile corvettes firing their deck gun.

The security environment in Southeast Asia has become politically charged due to these incidents and resulting tensions. This has led the Chinese press, regional media and some security analysts to view virtually all military activities through the prism of the South China Sea dispute. For example, on June 11, the *Global Times*, an English-language newspaper published by the Chinese Communist Party, editorialized that Vietnam's conduct of a live-firing exercises was the "lowest form of nationalism to create a new enmity between the people of the two countries. Hanoi seems to be looking to dissipate domestic pressure and buck up morale at home, while at the same time further drawing in the concern of international society over the South China Sea dispute."

Recently announced military exercises between the Philippines and the United States, and military exchange activities between Vietnam and the United States, have been viewed through the same prism. These exercises have been portrayed as contributing to regional tensions or an effort by the weaker Southeast Asian states to draw in the United States in their territorial conflict with China. China's *Global Times* editorialised on June 14, for example, "If Vietnam wishes to create a war in the South China Sea, China will resolutely keep them

company. China has the absolute might to crush the naval fleets sent from Vietnam. China will show no mercy to its rival due to "global impact" concerns.... even if some friction occurs (with the U.S.) that is no reason for China to put up with Vietnam's unlimited vice in the South China Sea."

This editorial and much Chinese commentary is a deliberate distortion of activities and is designed to intimidate Manila and Hanoi from further engagement with the United States. The exercises and activities described below all entered their planning stage long before Chinese assertiveness precipitated current tensions. At most, these exercises and activities demonstrate that the U.S. is welcomed in Southeast Asia precisely because it can offset the impact of China's bullying and gunboat diplomacy on weaker states.

#### Philippines-U.S. Naval Exercises

The current U.S. naval exercises with the Philippines, scheduled from June 28 to July 8, are the seventeenth in a series under the auspices of the Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training (CARAT) program. These exercises are being held in the Sulu Sea in waters off Palawan island where the headquarters of the Philippines' Naval Forces West are located. These exercises have been deliberately restricted from the South China Sea so as not to raise undue alarm.

CARAT 2011 involves three U.S. ships, two navy destroyers and a salvage ship, three

Philippines ships and navy personnel from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore. According of a U.S. Navy spokesperson, CARAT is “a scenario-driven fleet training exercise against terrorism, transnational crimes and other maritime threats which focuses on real time information exchange, coordinated surveillance operations, tracking, and eventual conduct of Visit Board Search and Seizure.” In addition to the military component, CARAT includes separate activities including diving and salvage, at-sea training, subject matter expert exchange and community relations. The U.S. and the Philippines will also conduct a “freedom of navigation” joint operation.

#### Vietnam-U.S. Naval Exchange Activities

In 2010, Vietnam and the United States conducted their first naval activity. Beijing charged Vietnam with conducting joint exercises aimed at China. In fact the naval activity took place on board the destroyer USS *John McCain* while it was docked in the port of Da Nang. It consisted of simulated fire fighting, a tabletop search and rescue exercise and an exchange of cooking recipes.

The use of the term “activity” is deliberate. In U.S. Defense Department terminology an “exercise” is part of combat training and Vietnam presently finds participation in joint (military) exercises with the U.S. as too sensitive.

On July 15, Vietnam and the United States will undertake their first naval exchange activities. This will involve the destroyer USS *Chung-Hoon* and a salvage ship visiting the port of Da Nang. This year’s activities include: search and rescue, damage control, and dive and salvage training as well as medical and dental clinics and a community relations project.

#### China-Vietnam Joint Naval Patrols

It is instructive to note that prior to the current Vietnam-U.S. naval exchange activities, China and Vietnam conducted their eleventh joint naval patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin from June 19-20. At the conclusion of the patrol, two Vietnamese warships visited the port of Zhanjiang in Guangdong province, their second port visit in two years.

#### China’s Annual Naval Exercises

The small scale and the highly focused exercises by the Philippines and Vietnam are in contrast to China’s conduct of training exercises in April and mid-June. Ten People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) warships participated in the April exercise and fourteen PLAN warships participated in the June exercise. The later involved live firing, refuelling at sea, anti-submarine operations and an amphibious landing on Hainan Island. One notable development was the deployment of a drone or UAV for use in target acquisition. Chinese media reported that these exercises were aimed at “defending atolls and protecting sea lanes.”

## Net Assessment

The current round of naval exercises and naval activities in the South China Sea must be placed in perspective. Although the security climate in the South China Sea has heated up noticeable this year, imminent war is not on the horizon. Most of the incidents described above between China and the Philippines/Vietnam, have involved civilian ships assigned to China Maritime Surveillance or Chinese fishing craft (which some analysts liken to militia at sea). More such incidents are likely but so far all sides have been restrained from deploying grey hull warships.

The Philippine represents a special case because it is a treaty ally of the United States. China has forced President Aquino's hand. He has appropriated funds to modernise the Armed Forces of the Philippines and he has sought security assurances from Washington.

Vietnam is treading the difficult path of trying to compartmentalise its bilateral relations with China from tensions over territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Vietnam seeks to encourage U.S. engagement in the region to offset China. But Vietnam is not aligning with the United States against China.

China will now have to consider the responses that it has provoked and decide whether to:

1. persist in its aggressive assertion of sovereignty
2. back off and let diplomacy take the lead or,
3. up the stakes by assigning PLAN warships to sovereignty protection duties.

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*



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South China Sea Area of Operations map:  
<http://kktg.net/KTG-ILblog/images/southchinasea.jpg>

Chinese South China Sea Fleet image:  
<http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-wd4GfPDipY0/TfIXhegPhtI/AAAAAAAAIbY/I8UxKj7xc6A/s1600/South+China+Sea+Fleet.jpg>

Outmoded Philippine Air Force F-5 fighter image:  
<http://img13.imageshack.us/img13/5889/f5ai.jpg>

Vietnamese naval personnel image:  
<http://the-diplomat.com/china-power/files/2011/06/Vietnam-Navy-400x276.jpg>

(Accessed: 06/07/2011)